Oral language: For most of us, oral language is our primary tool for communicating and constructing meaning from experiences.

Oral language takes many forms. At some times and in some places oral language may be rich in details, elaborate, and extensive. In some circumstances oral language may be sparse, but include rich demonstrations, or powerful, evocative images. Oral language can hurt or heal, nurture or negate, encourage or defeat.

Oral language includes the gestures we make, the cadences we use, our facial expression, and other nonverbal aspects of oralcy. The way something is said is at least as important as what is said. Children in particular are especially tuned into non-verbal or para-verbal components of oral language. If the spoken words and the accompanying non-verbal components of a message are dissonant, or do not align, the non-verbal component is likely to carry more credence in the construction of meaning from the exchange.

Oral language adjusts to the purpose, the setting, and the speakers and listeners. We all speak differently in different circumstances and we shift from one way of speaking to another as circumstances change. We call these different, situational and socially determined ways of talking **registers**. We all have a **range of registers**, and we begin to develop our “range of registers” at quite an early age. Have you ever observed three and four year olds playing “house?” Do you remember engaging in such social-dramatic play yourself? If you have experienced playing house, you know that the mommy talks like a mommy, the child talks like a child, and the person who gets to play the cat, well, that person talks like a cat!

Just think about the was your vocabulary, sentence structures, style, intonation patterns, pacing, and more change when you are talking to a child, to an adult with whom you have a close, perhaps even intimate, relationship, to a customer, to a parent, in a university classroom, during a parent teacher conference. Sometimes the more background information, shared knowledge, and context share by speakers and listeners, the less needs to be expressed directly in words.

For example, when I holler the one word question “Coffee? Through the bathroom door when my husband is taking a shower on a work day morning, the meaning that I expect is being constructed on his part is something like. Am I running late for my first appointment or do I have time to share coffee, some toast, and conversation over the morning paper.” A single word response such as “Sure.” Coming from behind the door, tells we to start the coffee brewing and put some toast in the toaster.

Oral language is a most powerful human tool. It is how we give meaning to our world and also shapes us as thinkers and doers. As teachers you and I are obligated to learn how to extend our students oral language abilities. We are obligated to help them all develop their own true voices.

**Children as Constructive Language Learners**

By now you have probably heard a great deal about **phonological** and **phonemic awareness**. You know these concepts are important to early literacy and may even (or not!) have these two related concepts pretty firmly established in your mind. You might be surprised to discover that what these terms refer to is oral language. For a teacher, it’s useful to think about spoken language as an integrated set of three systems. The names of these inter-related systems are **phonological**, **syntactic**, and **semantic**.

I’m curious to know what comes to your mind when you hear each of those three words. Your prior knowledge probably triggers thoughts of sound, word order, and word meanings. If so, you are on the right track for thinking about each of the systems in relation to teaching and learning language.

The phonological system is the sound system of a language. I often say that children are born preprogrammed to attend to the phonemes, or isolated bits of sound that matter in the spoken language or languages used in their environment. Children are born capable of producing unlimited speech sounds, but by as early as six months of age babble in the sounds, or phonemes, that are used in the languages in which their lives are immersed. An infant who is regularly hears English only, will babble in sounds common to English. A child whose important caregivers speak different languages will babble in sounds used in the languages spoken by each of the people who love and care for him or her. Pretty amazing, isn’t it? When children a young they can learn to accurately recognize and eventually produce the phonemes used in all languages. Sometimes they recognize a phoneme even before their articulatory system has matured enough to produce the phoneme. When we learn a new language as an adult, it is very difficult to speak the new language without an accent. That’s because as mature speakers of a language we are no longer as flexible in producing or even perceiving phonemes that we have learned to eliminate or never developed in our first language. I find this kind of “stuff” about language development fascinating. If you are interested in exploring more about the phonological system of languages, I would be happy to suggest some resources.

Phonemes are important in the education of young writers in particular. In fact, taking on the role of being a writer has an added advantage in that it sharpens children’s listening powers. Saying words slowly, which is sometimes called **rubber-banding** or **stretching out** words helps children make connections between spoken words and letters. Teachers and parents need to be active in helping children learn how to pronounce spoken words and letters. Sometimes it is even helpful to clearly show a child where your tongue and teeth are placed when a sound in a word is said. I’m not suggesting that you go overboard in correcting a young child’s speech because it is always important to pay more attention to what the child is communicating than making corrections. Nonetheless, a well placed demonstration can make a huge difference in building a child’s spoken language power.

When children say words slowly, they can hear the sequence of sounds and feel the position of tongue, lips, and teeth as they say them. Doing so makes it easier to connect sounds to letters they can write. This is no easy task for young learners because children not only must hear the individual phonemes but also connect those phonemes to how letters look and are made. T hey also are managing the directional movements required to write them. So, when you discover that a young child with whom you are working has written something like, “Ynspnatim” to start a story, be impressed. That child is showing you a lot about **phonemic awareness**, **letter knowledge**, the **alphabetic principle**, and developing **concept of word**.

OK, I think our brain’s are about full of language development stuff for one go at it. I’ll my sharing about the **syntactic** and **semantic** systems for a new entry on our literacymethods wiki text. If you noticed some interesting things that children say or do to show you more about learning to be competent communicators, please add your language stories to our wiki. Try not to worry about messing anything up on the wiki. Carolyn is really skillful at sorting out the organization.

Also, please be really, really comfortable in terms the kind of addition you make. I’m pretty much tied to pouring out what “in the day” would have been a lecture, intended for note taking into a narrative, where I imagine that I am talking with our students about “what it is I think they need to know and be able to do” in order to be a good teacher. Make you additions in the format that is most comfortable for you. That could be links to other web pages, videos, photos, work samples, etc. etc. ect.

Some parting thoughts.

Practice talking with children. It’s really important.

The more meaningful interaction children have with more skillful language users the farther along their language development will go.

Some kids hear and engage in thousands upon thousands more shared oral exchanges than others. Poverty tends to restrict language.

Don’t be afraid to help a child slow done his or her speech a little. Let them know that you really, really, want to hear everything they say and get what they mean.

Don’t be afraid to explicitly show a child how to pronounce a sound.

Practice engaging young children in meaningful conversations. Avoid yes or no questions. Use specific words rather than indefinite references like that, those, this, etc. when you can.

Ask questions that stimulate thinking and wondering.

Talk with children about ideas you have. Ask them for their ideas.

Get eye to eye when you and children are talking.

Practice reflecting what a child tells you and asking an extension question to keep the conversation going and extend the child’s thinking.

Some kids here and get to construct meaning for thousands upon thousands of more words (vocabulary) than others.

Often receptive competence is ahead of productive competence for all three interrelated, integrated language systems (phonological, syntactic, and semantic).

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